A Long-Term Survival Guide – Survival Cabins:

Knowing how to build small cabins is an important survival skill.

Why? Well, there are several possible situations where being able to build your own little log cabin would greatly improve your chances of staying alive, in a long-term survival scenario.

A small log cabin makes a good permanent, self-built, long-term survival shelter.

Let’s face it - life is uncertain, and stuff happens. Here are a few examples:

You may have picked out a retreat location, and intend to build a survival compound there, but need to bugout before the shelter is constructed.

Or perhaps you evacuated in your RV, intending to park it at your retreat area, but wound up having to abandon it due to engine failure (or a washed-out bridge, etc), and are forced to make it to your chosen area on foot.

You might already have a retreat shelter, but more friends and relatives showed up after the crash than you had expected, and now you need extra housing.

Inflation or unemployment could keep you from being able to purchase a home or bunker, or even the building materials, leaving you with no other option than to build it yourself, using local materials.

Or maybe you have a shelter, but come back from hunting or fishing and find it burned to the ground. Now what?

So for one reason or another, you may find that you need to build yourself a cabin. Could you do it?

Lots of folks have built small cabins in the woods, starting with the pioneers, and doing so is still a desire for many people, the age-old dream of moving to Alaska (or any other remote area), building your own home, and living off the land by hunting, fishing, trapping, panning for gold, gardening, and raising small livestock.

A survival cabin can be described as a small (one-room) basic shelter, built on the simplest foundation, which is intended to give you a secure place to live, and which can be improved upon when you have the time and energy.

Survival Cabin: A simple trapper-style log cabin, with small entrance door, sod roof, and elevated food cache.

Back in the 60s, a guy named Dick Proenneke filmed himself when he built his own Alaskan cabin, and then he lived in it for 35 years, as shown in the movie “Alone In The Wilderness”. Let’s take a look at just what he did:

Proenneke built this one-room cabin alone, using simple hand tools, and filmed the process. (Pardon the low resolution of these captures, as the filming was done with old technology.)

Transportation: Proenneke used a canoe for transportation, for himself, his supplies, and his building materials.

Tools: Proenneke used simple hand tools, and made some of them from local materials, like this wooden mallet.

He also packed in auger bits and chisel blades, and made his own wooden handles for them from local wood.

Once he had his basic hand tools, Proenneke also cut up empty food and fuel cans, to make buckets and pans.

Tools were sharpened as needed, using simple hand files.

Proenneke selected the location for his cabin, then cut and stacked all of the logs, and let them dry for a year, before starting the actual construction work the next year. But you can build with green logs, if pressed for time.

Foundation: He used the simplest foundation possible, a thick pad of gravel, hauled in his improvised buckets from the lake shore. A gravel pad is a good choice for a survival cabin because it is simple, easy to level (just drag a log across it), provides good drainage, and allows access to the ground beneath (so you can build a cellar later).

To make the cabin walls, Proenneke notched and fit the logs one by one, starting by carefully marking each notch.

After sawing several slots in the marked notch, axes were used to chop it out, and a chisel was used to finish it up.

Each notch was tested to see how well it fit, and adjusted as needed, and the walls slowly took shape, log by log.

If a log had slight bulges or irregularities, those areas were hewed and draw-shaved down, until the log fit better.

To compensate for their natural tapering, logs were stacked with alternating butt ends and top ends, for each wall.

Once the walls were high enough, Proenneke cut the window and door openings, and chinked the logs with moss.

The rafter logs were the longest logs, and were allowed to project out, to make a porch roof overhang at each end.

Once all the cabin logs were set in place, Proenneke cut the log ends off flush, making them look nicely finished. (Note how the log ends are alternated top end to butt end, to compensate for the natural tapering.)

Once he was ready to frame the cabin door and window openings, Proenneke made a simple log sawhorse, and used it to support the logs that he split to make the framing timbers, as he smoothed the slabs with a drawknife.

To make the roof for the cabin, Proenneke collected dozens of long, straight poles, shaved off the bark with a drawknife, tied them into bundles, and towed the bundles across the lake to the cabin site, using his canoe.

After getting all of the roof poles to the cabin, he leaned them up along both long sides of the building, to make it easy to sort them by size and length, and to verify that he had enough poles to completely cover the entire roof.

Each pole was set into place (with the top ends alternating along the ridge), secured with nails, and trimmed to length. (If nails are not available in a survival situation, poles can be drilled, and secured with hardwood pegs.) Even though he left gaps between his poles, it still took approximately 100 poles to cover both sides of the roof.

To keep mice and squirrels from getting in through the roof pole gaps, Proenneke cut short sections of poles, shaped them to fit the gaps, and hammered them into place where the roof poles crossed over the log walls.

Proenneke finished his cabin roof by adding a layer of tar paper, a layer of plastic sheeting, and a layer of moss.

There was a lot of moss growing in the local area, so he made a wooden rack to carry loads of it to the cabin, after cutting large squares of moss loose with a shovel. The entire cabin roof was covered with a thick layer of moss.

To make shelves, Proenneke used split log sections. These were supported by wooden pegs driven into holes that he drilled into the wall logs.

The cabin door was made with clever wooden hinges, that Proenneke crafted from shaped sections of tree butts.

The hinge joints were carefully cut and shaped to fit together, and they pivoted on simple wooden hinge pins.

Once he had four sets of hinges completed, Proenneke split up a log, to make enough boards for the cabin door.

The hinges were attached to the cabin wall, and then to the door planks. The hinges were placed with one at the top, and one at the bottom, and two at the center, so that the door could be cut in half, to make a French door. This was simply personal preference, as a standard door would have worked just as well, and needed less hinges.

Once his French door was completed, Proenneke designed a clever wooden latching mechanism, to keep it closed.

This is the door latching mechanism, which has a handle on both sides of the door, and a simple locking lever.

Once the front of the cabin was finished, Proenneke started work on the fireplace, at the back end of the cabin.

After hauling loads of rocks to the fireplace end of the cabin, Proenneke collected sand and gravel, and mixed it with commercially-made cement, to make mortar for the fireplace masonry work. If you don’t have any cement, mud or clay mixed with chopped up grass straw (like adobe) makes a perfectly adequate mortar substitute.

After cutting out the fireplace opening, he built the stone fireplace. To make an arched opening to the fireplace, Proenneke constructed a curved wooden form for the arched stones to rest on temporarily, until the mortar cured.

To keep the inside of the chimney shaft as even as possible, Proenneke devised a collapsible form, which could be easily removed when the chimney reached the top of the form, and repositioned higher. He also cut away enough of the overhanging roof poles at the back of the cabin, to allow the chimney shaft to rise up past the cabin roof.

Once the fireplace was finished, Proenneke tested it out. The fireplace had a nice draw, keeping smoke out of the cabin. Next it was time to collect more raw materials, using the canoe, and make some basic cabin furnishings.

After collecting and peeling some poles, he used basic joinery techniques to construct a bedframe, and a chair.

This is Proenneke’s bedframe and chair, simple in design, but functional.

Once he had furniture, he gathered more materials and made an outhouse out of poles. He also split up a log to make the planks for the outhouse door, and made hinges from flattened tin cans, using nails for the hinge pins.

Here Proenneke is splitting the log into planks, making the hinges, and hanging the outhouse door.

He also built a simple firewood storage shed from poles, to keep his firewood supply dry.

Proenneke made a food storage pit, to keep his perishable foods cold. It was covered by a thick layer of moss.

Most of his food came from game animals he acquired by hunting and fishing. He used the furs for blankets and rugs, and smoked the meat and fish under a simple tripod covered by a tarp. (Animal skins would also work.)

Proenneke stored his smoked meats by hanging them up in a tree, wrapped in cloth, until he had time to build an elevated food cache. The cache was a tiny cabin on stilts, used to keep food safe from bears and other animals.

When winter arrived, Proenneke made a hand sled, for moving supplies over the snow and ice.

The sled was made from small poles, using the same joinery techniques as used to make the furniture.

Here is the finished sled, which can be pushed from behind, or towed with a rope, or a team of dogs.

Proenneke made an improvised snow shovel, using poles and part of a metal oil drum. He also attached a large chisel blade to a pole, and used it to cut holes in the lake ice, for collecting water in buckets, and for ice fishing.

Proenneke’s little survival cabin allowed him to live comfortably through many harsh Alaskan winters.

Carving your own wooden cooking utensils, like Proenneke did, is a traditional bushcraft (or woodcraft) skill.

After finding a large boll on a tree, Proenneke cut it into slabs, which he used to make tables, and a wooden bowl.

Here is one of the tables, and the bowl, made from the tree boll. Smaller bolls are often used to make cups.

Here are the two finished tables, one on either side of the cabin door, and a shot of the cabin's interior, showing some of the storage shelves and supplies. Proenneke was a nature photographer and a writer, and his work gave him an income that he used to buy supplies, which were delivered by float plane.

He also did a bit of gardening, growing some carrots, onions, and potatoes.

Proenneke used his improvised buckets to water his garden, and his improvised pans to collect the harvest.

He also reused empty bottles and jars, gathering wild berries to make his own syrups.

Proenneke’s cabin is now a historic building, and it has held up quite well for over five decades.

Ok, so Proenneke did a good job with his cabin, and many people would be fortunate to do as well themselves, but there are many other things he did not do, that bear illustrating, as possible ideas for use at a survival cabin.

I liked Proenneke's canoe, but if you can't buy one for some reason, you can always make your own. People have been making and using dugout canoes for centuries; all you need is a log, a couple of tools, and some know-how.

An axe and an adze are the two basic dugout canoe construction tools, but a chainsaw makes for faster results.

One canoe is good, but two is better! Lashing two canoes (of any type) together to form a canoe catamaran results in a superior craft, which is extremely stable, and which can carry large amounts of cargo, with no tipping danger.

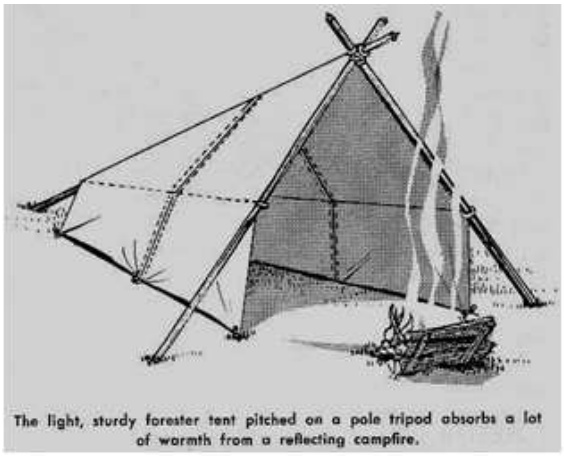
Canoe catamarans are stable enough to stand in, and the support beams can also be used to mount an outboard.

You can also build a platform between your canoes, to make your catamaran even more useful. Depending on size, a platform can be used to carry extra cargo, or as a fishing platform, or with a tent, as a floating campsite. The canoes don't have to be the same size, either, Even a canoe and a kayak can be used together successfully.

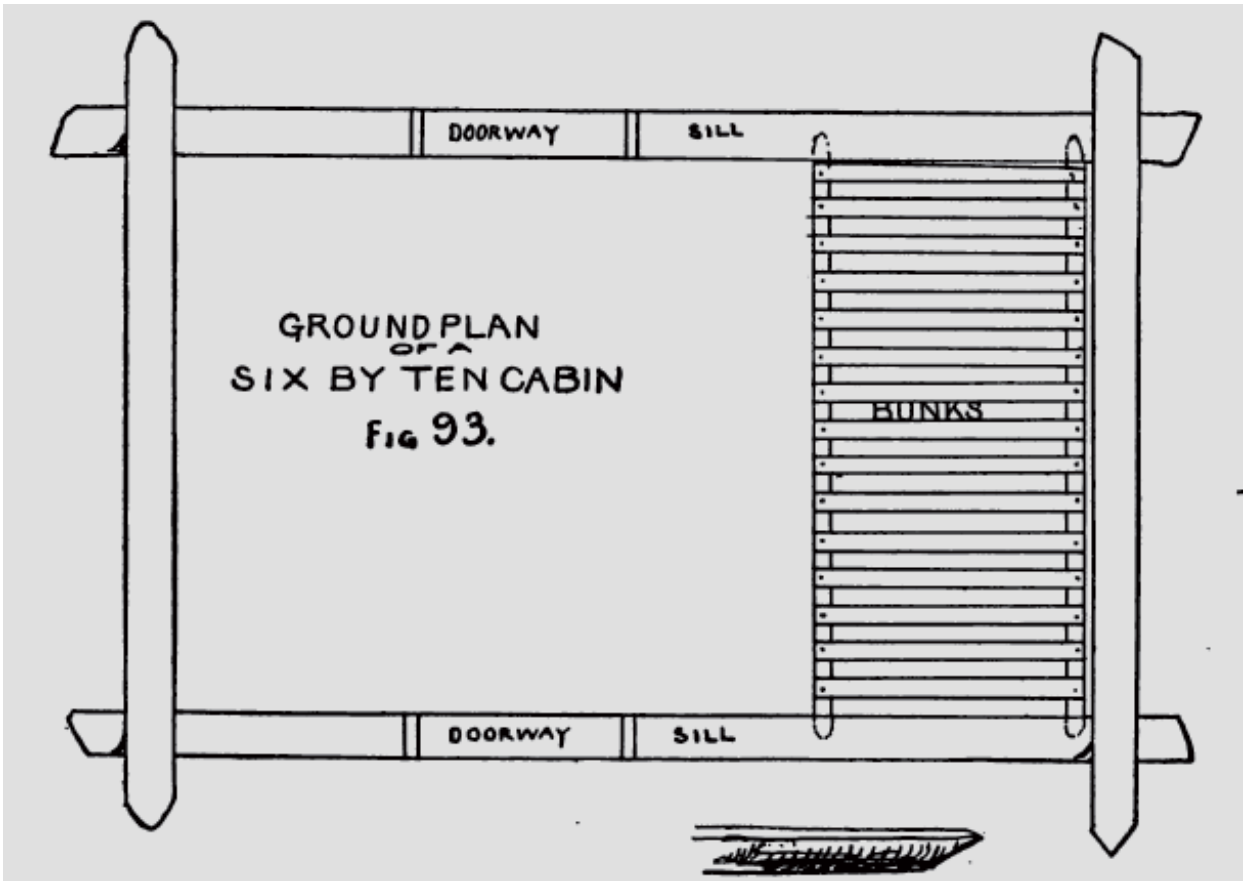
Larger canoe catamarans can even be used to ferry people or vehicles across rivers, if bridges are not available.

Temporary Shelter: While Proenneke was working on his cabin, he stayed in another nearby cabin that belonged to a friend. Most people needing to build a survival cabin will probably not have this luxury, but will need some type of temporary shelter, until the survival cabin is habitable. Unless you have a van, RV, or camper, your best options will be constructing a sturdy bushcraft hut, or making yourself a tent, from available materials.

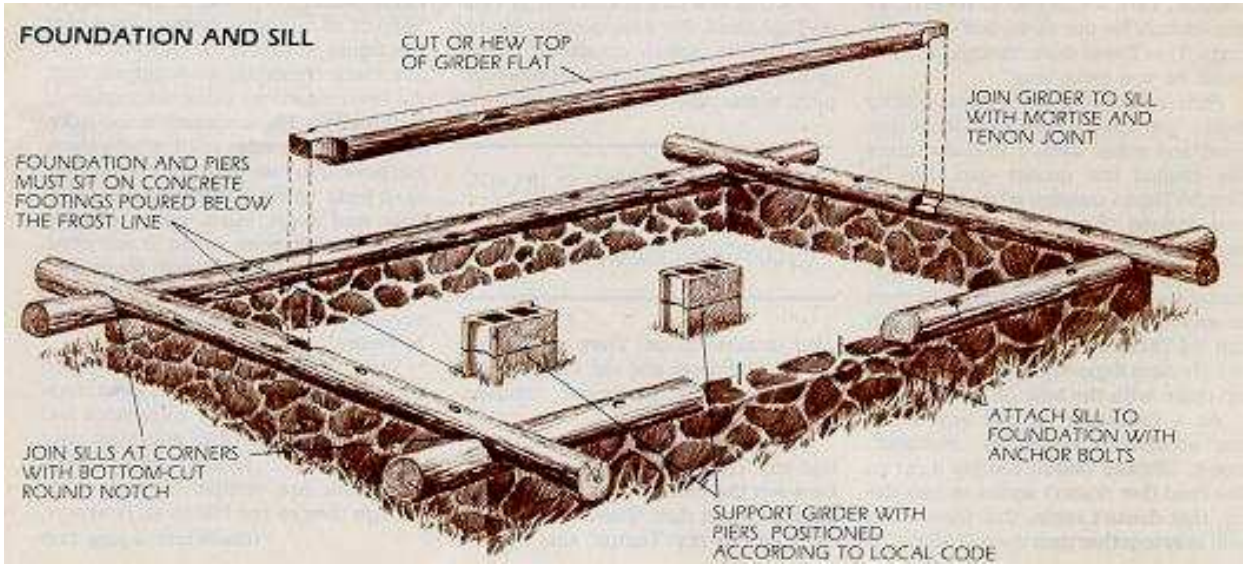
A sturdy bushcraft hut makes an adequate temporary shelter to live in, until your survival cabin is finished.



An improvised tent, made from tarps and poles (or animal hides and poles), is another temporary shelter option.



Cabin Size: Six feet by ten feet is about the smallest practical size, for a one-man survival cabin. (Proenneke's cabin was approximately eleven feet by fourteen feet.) More people will require more living space, but you can always build the one-room cabin first, and then add extra rooms on each side afterwards, as necessary.


FOUNDATION AND SILL
CUT OR HEW TOP OF GIRDER FLAT
JOIN GIRDER TO SILL WITH MORTISE AND TENON JOINT
FOUNDATION AND PIERS MUST SIT ON CONCRETE FOOTINGS POURED BELOW THE FROST LINE
ATTACH SILL TO FOUNDATION WITH ANCHOR BOLTS
JOIN SILLS AT CORNERS WITH BOTTOM-CUT ROUND NOTCH
SUPPORT GIRDER WITH PIERS POSITIONED ACCORDING TO LOCAL CODE

Foundation: Although I prefer the gravel pad foundation for survival cabins (because you can start building the walls right away), if you have the desire (and time available) to construct a more traditional foundation for your cabin, here is one possible design. With elevated foundations, you will also need to build a wooden cabin floor.

Here is a typical small cabin, with elevated food cache. Note the roof poles, visible under the extended porch.

You can build a survival cabin without the extended porch, but I prefer to have the extra outdoor sheltered space.

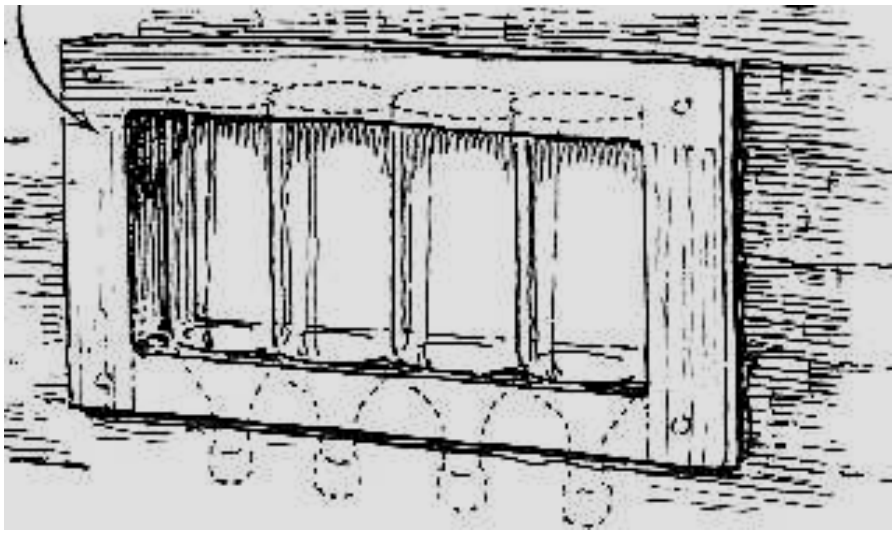
The number, size, and location of cabin doors and windows can be arranged in any manner that you like. Some trapping cabins have been made with no windows, and tiny doors, to keep bears from breaking in.

This sturdy windowless cabin with one tiny door is designed to keep bears out, while you are busy checking traps. The downside to these is that interior lighting is limited to lamplight, fireplace light, and light from the open door.

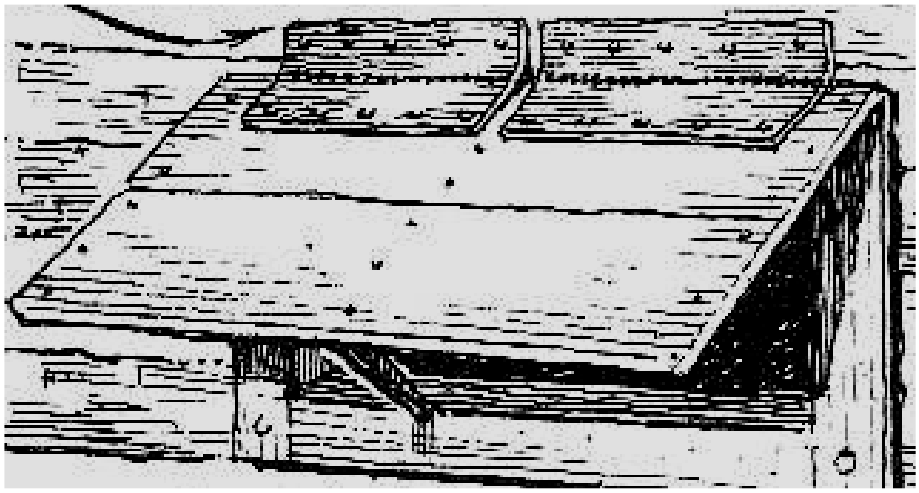
You don’t have to live in a windowless hut, but it helps to keep windows small, and use sturdy wooden shutters.

Another technique to deter bears and other pests is to use nails to make spiked doors, shutters, and mats. The spiked mats are known as “unwelcome mats”, and are easier to make and use than spiked pit traps. Boards with nails (called spike strips) can be also placed below each window.

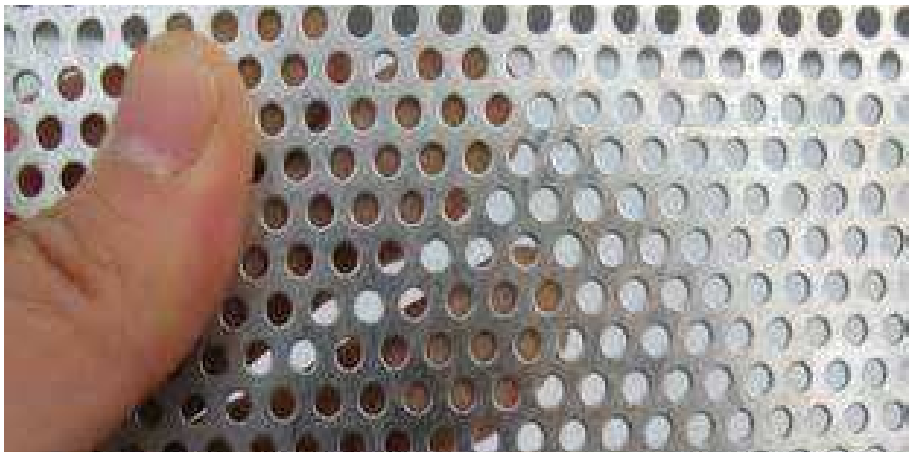
One way to make windows for your survival cabin is to use empty bottles or jars, as shown below. You can almost always find discarded bottles everywhere, and they make sturdy, narrow windows.



Empty glass bottles or jars can be made into improvised cabin windows.



Cabin windows can (and should) be covered with wooden shutters like these. The hinges are made from leather.



You can also use a nail to make lots of tiny holes in sheet metal, and use these improvised screens as windows.

Logs aren't the only possible building material for a survival cabin. If you have access to milled lumber, why not use it? In a long-term survival scenario, you may wind up building survival cabins out of lumber salvaged from homes destroyed by tornadoes or other natural disasters. Stay mentally flexible, and use whatever is available.

Another unique cabin building material possibility is landscaping timbers. If you can get your hands on some they make for fast and easy construction (almost as easy as Lincoln Logs), and they only cost about two dollars apiece.

Of course if you live in an area where trees are not abundant, but rocks are plentiful, it makes more sense to build a stone survival cabin. You will still need some timbers for roofing materials, but stone cabins can be even more secure than log cabins, if you make the walls thick enough.

A stone survival cabin can be made with dry-laid stones (no mortar), but the structure will be more secure with mortar between the stones. An excellent survival mortar is mud or clay mixed with chopped grass, like adobe.

If some building materials are scarce, such as wooden beams in the desert, make the best use of what is available. The most important resource in arid environments is water, so desert survival cabins should be built AFTER you have found and developed a reliable water source. If possible, build the cabin around the well, so that you can get water without having to go outside, in case of bad weather or under combat conditions.

Traditional desert shelters made of stone tend to look like these two examples. Round buildings require less materials for the walls, and building with stone lets you save scarce timbers for use as the roof support beams.

The dugout cabin is another good design for survival use. Although it takes effort to excavate, a dugout is very energy efficient, staying warmer in winter and cooler in summer, and you will need less firewood for heating.

Dugouts can be made from stones or logs, using any simple building design that you prefer.

Yet another cabin building material is cordwood. Short lengths of log sections are used to make walls, like stones.

Cordwood cabins usually need a sturdy timber framework, for support. Here is one way to make a framework.

If nothing better is available, it is even possible to build cabins and other structures from scrap wood. The cabins and shed shown here were made primarily out of wooden shipping pallets. While I would prefer my survival cabin to be as sturdy as possible, if you need a quick and easy firewood storage shed, this idea might work out ok.

One final material to consider for your survival cabin is adobe. Adobe is just mud or clay that is mixed with chopped dry grass. The mixture is formed into bricks, in simple wooden moulds, and then dried in the sun.

Once the adobe bricks have thoroughly dried, they are laid up into walls, using more adobe mix as the mortar.

Adobe bricks can be formed in wooden moulds that make one brick at a time, or several bricks at once.

Roofing: Proenneke made his cabin roof using tar paper and plastic sheeting. You may not have those materials available in a long-term survival situation, but there are other low-tech options that you can use, to make a roof.

Wooden shakes (shingles) can be split from sections of log rounds, using a froe (or large knife) and a club (maul). You could split whole logs into planks, and roof with them, but it's harder to find entire logs with straight grain.

Once you split a supply of wooden shingles, they are secured to the roof with nails (or drilled and pegged).

Wooden shingles make a good roofing material, but they eventually weather, and have to be replaced.

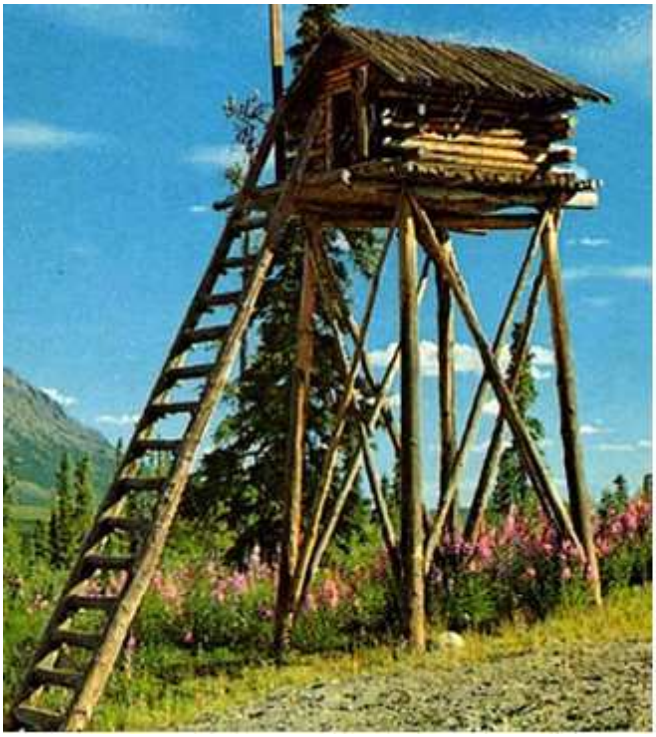
If you are in an area where slate is available, this flat stone makes excellent shingles, and a fire-proof roof.

Slate shingles must be shaped, and have a couple of holes drilled on the top edge, so they can be secured in place.

Another roofing material to consider is metal cans. Can lids, flattened aluminum cans, and flattened steel cans have all been used as improvised roofing shingles. You just need to collect enough of them to cover your roof.

Cans make good shingles, or even metal siding. Metal cans eventually rust, but aluminum cans last indefinitely.

After you have built a survival cabin, you will need an outhouse. It should be downhill from your water source.



Another useful cabin outbuilding is an elevated food cache, used for storing dried and smoked meat and fish. The ladder is not normally left in place, it is removed to make it harder for hungry animals to reach your cache. Metal sheathing is sometimes added to the support poles, to make it hard for critters to climb up to your food.

There are as many different styles of food cache buildings as there are different styles of small cabins.

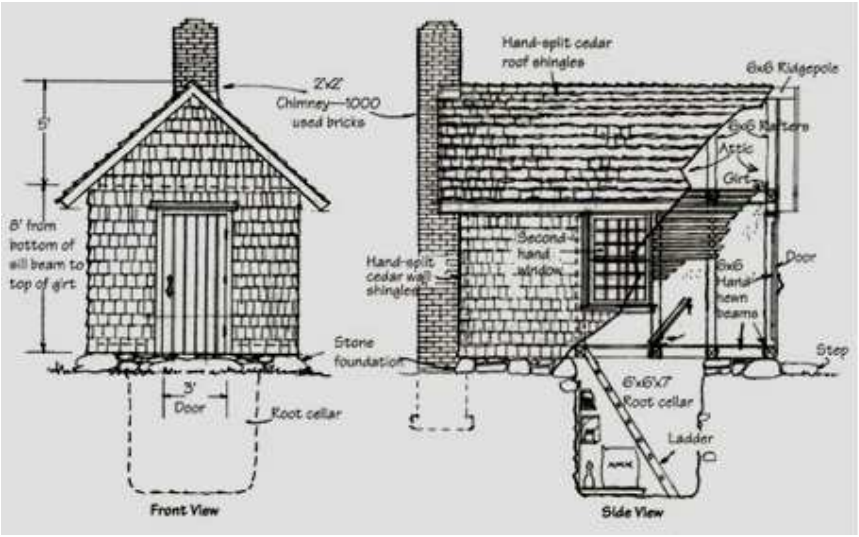
A food cache can be both functional, and decorative. A well-designed cache looks good, and protects your food. Even if you have other food storage options available, such as a cellar, you may want to make a cache just for fun. Your cache could be made to look just like a miniature version of your cabin, or you may want a different design.

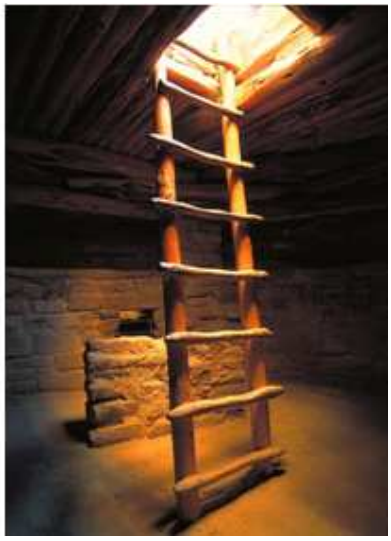
Although elevated food caches are normally built up on stilts to keep your food supply safe, you can also make the same types of small log buildings down at ground level, and then use them as storage sheds, for your gear.

Since you will probably be heating your survival cabin with wood, you will need some type of wood storage shed.

A firewood storage shed needs a roof, to keep rain off your wood, and an open design, to let the wood air-dry.

Other sheds: There are still other ways to build storage sheds, such as thatched sheds, and sod-covered sheds.





Cellars: A cellar is a desirable feature to add to your survival cabin. Even a tiny cellar that is only six feet by six feet can hold a lot of food, and you don't have to go outside to get it. Cabin cellars have also been used as storm shelters, hiding places (hide the trap door under an animal skin rug, or put your bed over it, etc.), wine cellars, and jail cells, and they are a good place to dig a well, or an escape tunnel, or both. A cabin that's built on the ground makes it easy to dig out a cellar, and a cellar with a dirt floor makes it easy to dig out some hidden storage pits.

Once the outside of your survival cabin is finished, you can decide how to arrange the inside.

Furnishings: Once you have a cabin, you will need some furniture. Proenneke made a simple bed, chair, and tables, but the designs he used are not the only ways to build cabin furnishings. Here are a few ideas to consider.

Chairs: Here are two kinds of chairs, each made from a single section of log.

Benches: Another basic item is a log bench, which can be used inside, outside, or on the porch.

Adding a couple of support logs raises the basic log bench up off the ground. Note the arm rests.

Here is a split log bench that is simple and functional, and requires very little carpentry to make.

This variation on the split log bench makes good use of two stumps that would be hard to split for wood.

A third type of split log bench is made with tapered log legs, secured into drilled holes.

Tables: There are a lot of ways to make a basic table. Here is an example made from wooden shipping pallets.

This picnic bench-style table is simple and well-designed; a good example of clever log construction.

I like this table design. Although secured with fasteners, the sticks could also be lashed together, bushcraft-style.

Yet another way to make tables is shown in these examples; the legs were carved with a chainsaw, then charred.

More Chairs: These chairs were made with the popular tapered log and drilled hole technique.

More Benches: The bench on the left is a rocking bench. Most log chairs can be made into rocking chairs, by using curved log sections for the rockers.

The bench on the right, with attached arch, can be used several ways. You can cover the arch with cloth, thatching, or an animal hide, for a shade canopy, or you can plant climbing vines on either side of the bench, train them up the arch and have an arbor bench, or you can add planters to both ends of the bench, grow the climbing vines in the planters, and have a portable arbor bench.

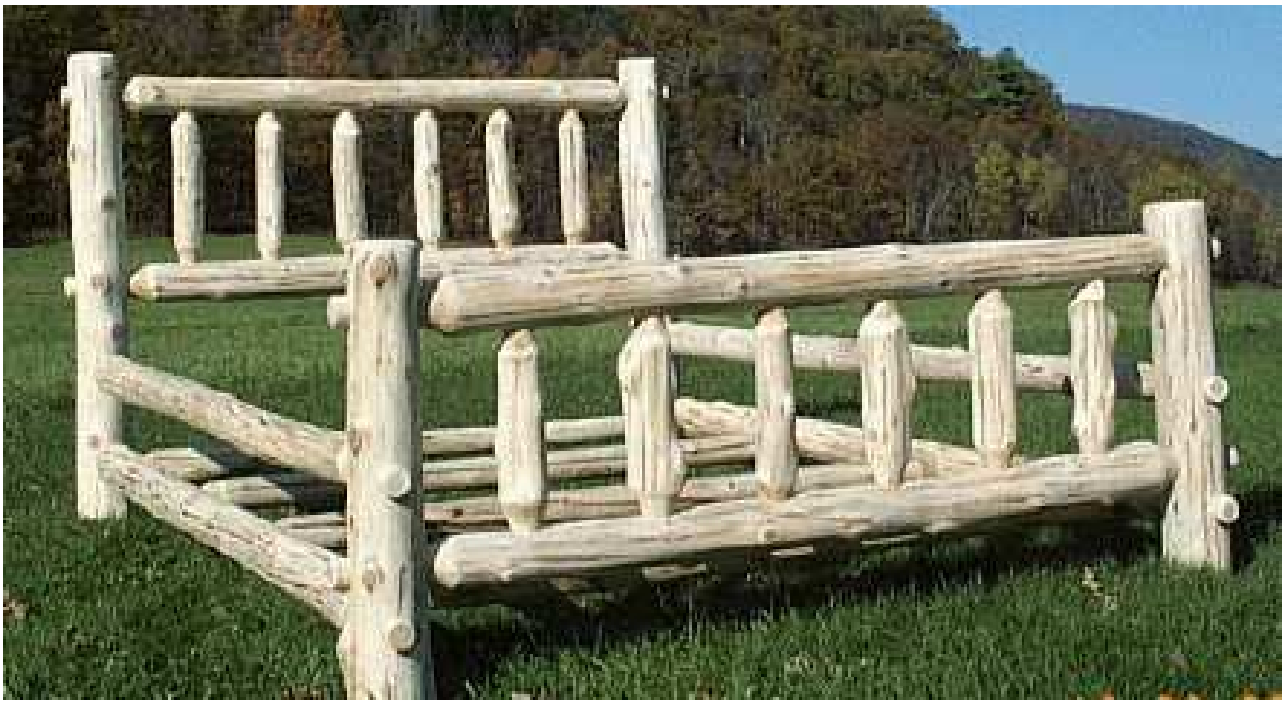
Porch Swings: Here is one way to make a rustic porch swing, so you can relax after a hard day of surviving.

This porch swing is made with the taper and drill technique.

Swings don’t have to be confined to the porch, either. You can hang one from a tree, or make your own support.

There are a couple of different ways to make swing support frames. Pick the one you like the best.

Here is a clever use of curved and twisted logs, to make a swing support.



Beds: This bed frame was constructed using the tapered log and drilled hole technique.

Curved logs can also be used, to make a bed frame, like this nicely crafted one.

Even twisted wood (that you might consider worthless for construction) can be used, if you are clever.

Space is tight in small cabins, so bunk bed designs are a good way to make maximum use of it.

This futon-style bunk bed is another space-saving design, or the upper bunk could be used for storage.

Ladders: Logs have been notched to create log ladders for hundreds of years. Plank steps are an optional upgrade.

Here is another way to notch a log, to make a log ladder.

If the traditional log ladder doesn’t appeal to you, check out this interesting spiral log staircase.

Fences: Logs and sticks can be made into rustic fences, to keep livestock in, and to keep intruders out.

There are several ways to make log and stick fences. Check out the ornamental gatehouse on the right.

I prefer my fences to be functional, but good designs can also be aesthetically pleasing.

Planters: Logs can be hollowed out, to make rustic planter boxes.

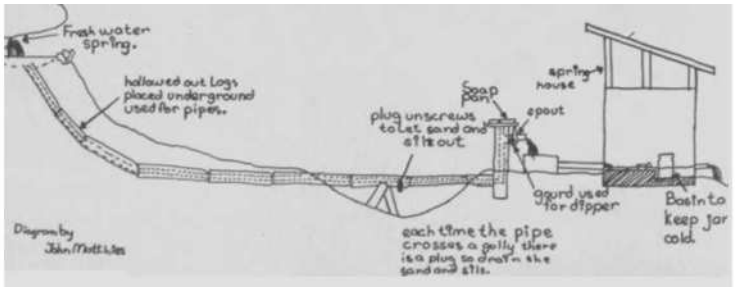
Log planters are a good place to grow flowers, culinary herbs, and medicinal herbs.

If you find naturally hollow logs, you can use them as planters as well.

Watering Troughs: Log water troughs were used long before metal ones became available, and they last for years.

A single watering trough can also be used to provide water to livestock in more than one fenced enclosure.

Running Water: Water can be supplied to your cabin from an uphill source, by using log gutters, or log pipes.

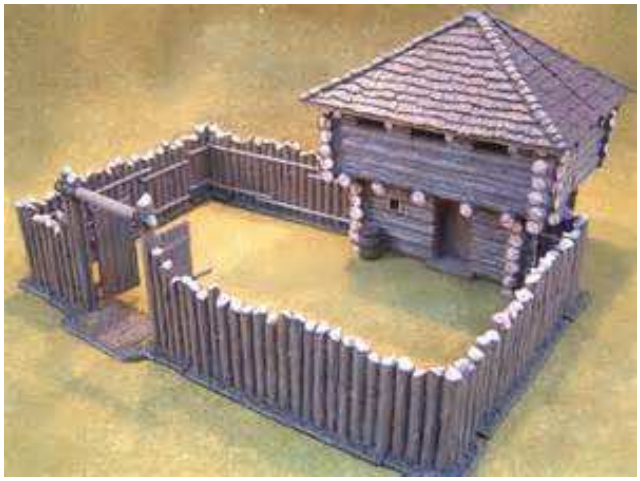

Fresh water spring.
hollowed out Logs placed underground used for pipes.
Soap pan
spring house
plug unscrews to let sand and silt out
spout
gourd used for dipper
Basin to keep jar cold
each time the pipe crosses a gully there is a plug to drain the sand and silt.

Log pipes are made by drilling out the center of logs with a long auger, and tapering one end, to fit in the next log.

Log Planters: Gardening at your survival cabin will be more productive if you build raised garden beds from logs.

Security Barriers: Log Cribs (oversized log planters filled with stones and gravel, with soil and plants on top) can be placed at strategic points around the cabin, for use as anti-vehicle obstacles, to prevent surprise vehicle attacks.

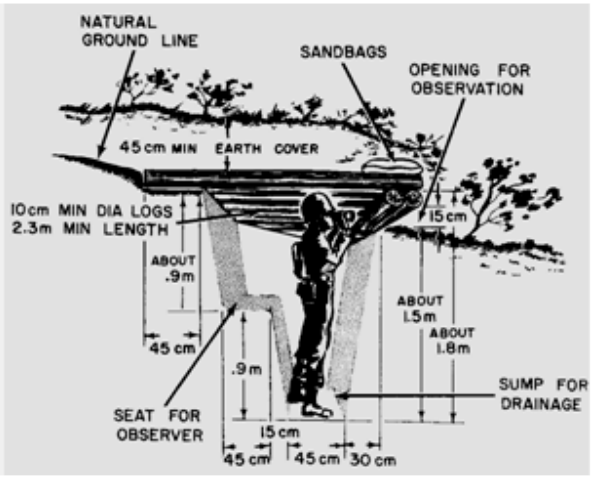
Ballistic Protection: Log cribs can be made even taller, and filled with loose gravel, for use as bullet-resistant barriers. These can be positioned in front of your cabin doors and windows, to protect you from sniper fire.



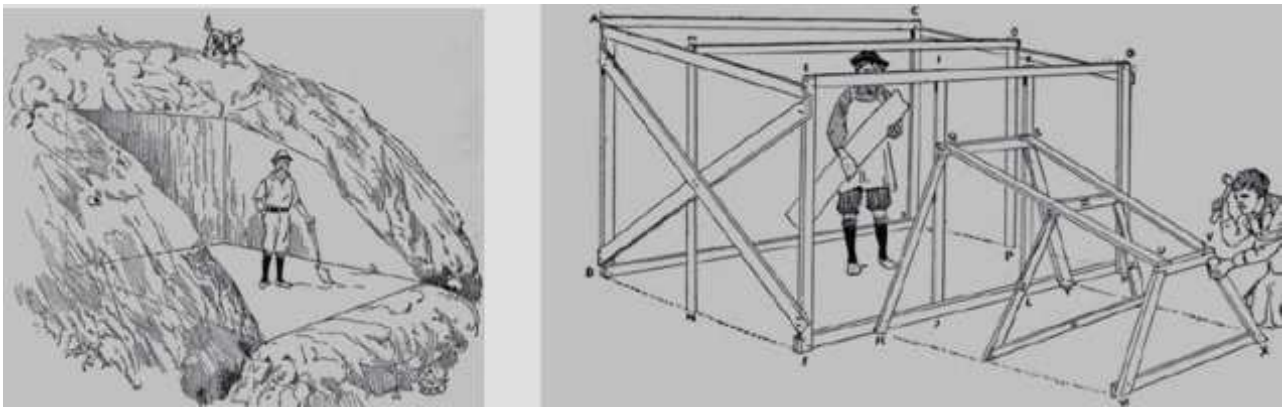
Another way to increase physical security is to build your survival cabin in the form of a pioneer blockhouse, within a log palisade. The blockhouse gives you an elevated observation and firing platform, and the palisade creates an enclosed safe area where you can have a garden, storage buildings, stables, etc, protected from attack.

A log palisade wall can be as tall as desired, and can be constructed with firing ports and elevated walkways.

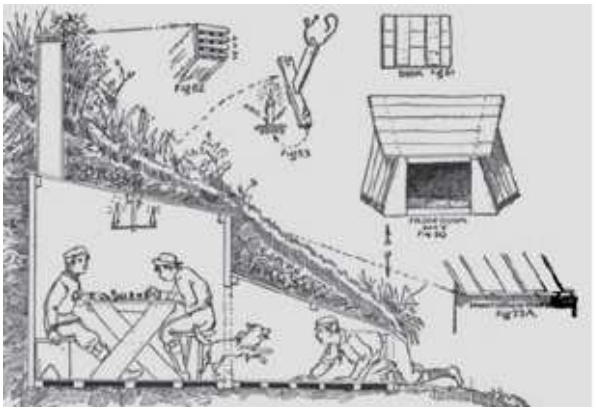
Blockhouses are usually positioned at one corner of a log palisade enclosure, for best strategic coverage, and usually have just one stout door (inside the palisade), and no windows (or narrow firing ports) at ground level. A perimeter fence is often built around the blockhouse, to make it harder for attackers to reach the building.

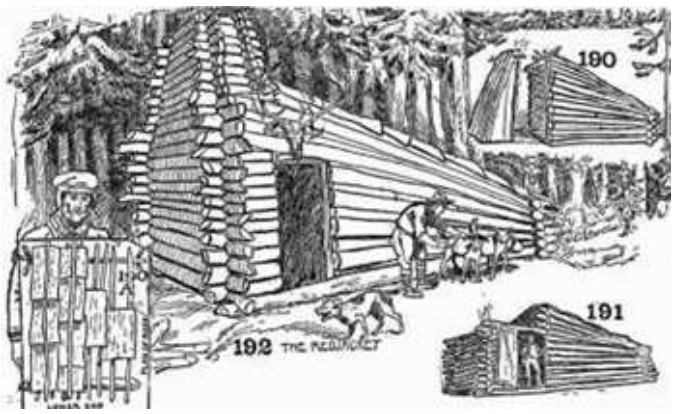


A less conspicuous way to defend your survival cabin is by making concealed fighting and observation positions. See my article “How to Survive a Sniper Attack” for ideas, or get the Army field manual on Field Fortifications.

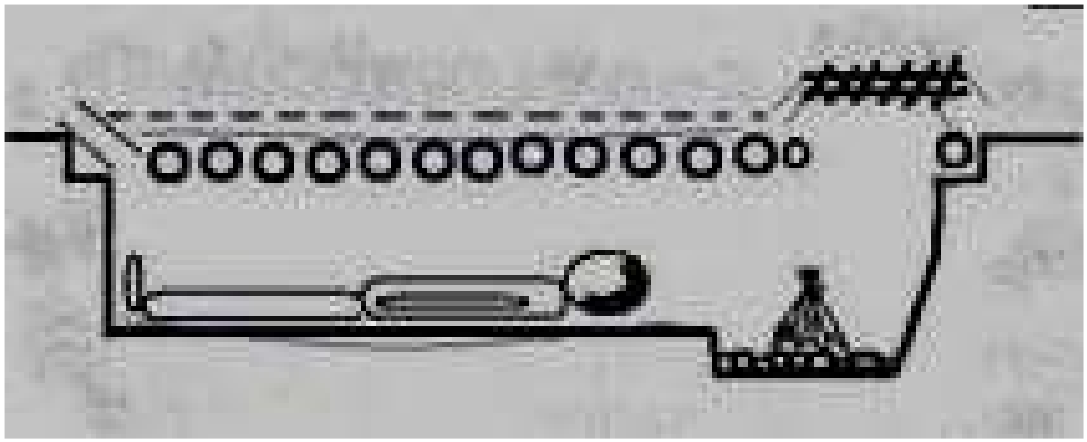


If you have the time and energy to excavate, you can construct a secret underground storage room, or a hideout, using a design similar to this one, dug into the side of a hill, and which can be made from milled lumber, or logs.





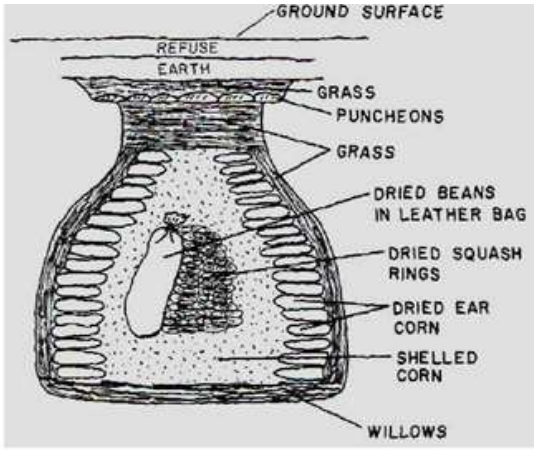
Notice how the hideout on the left is similar in shape to the primitive cabin on the right? Just change the location of the door to the small end of the cabin, and you have the log version of the hideout. I prefer to have two exits in my hideouts, so I would make the “chimney” large enough to use as a small emergency escape hatch, just in case.



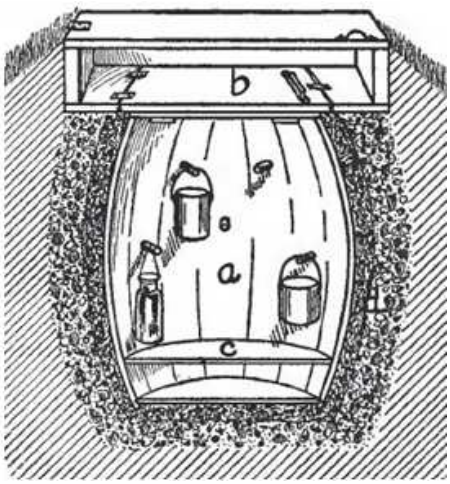
Another type of hide you should know how to make is called a scout pit. This is a hidden, covered trench shelter which is large enough to lie down inside. These pits can be used as concealed hideouts, hidden camping shelters, or secure sleeping areas, or they can be used as caches to store equipment and supplies, or modified for use as sniper positions. Scout pits can be made with a trap door entrance, or they can have a crawlway entrance instead.

How to make a scout pit: Dig a trench, cover with logs and dirt, create an entranceway, and then disguise it well. The basic scout pit can be improved by adding a layer of waterproof material over it, and by transplanting local live vegetation (bushes, grasses, etc) to the overhead cover, to improve concealment (I like thorny plants best).

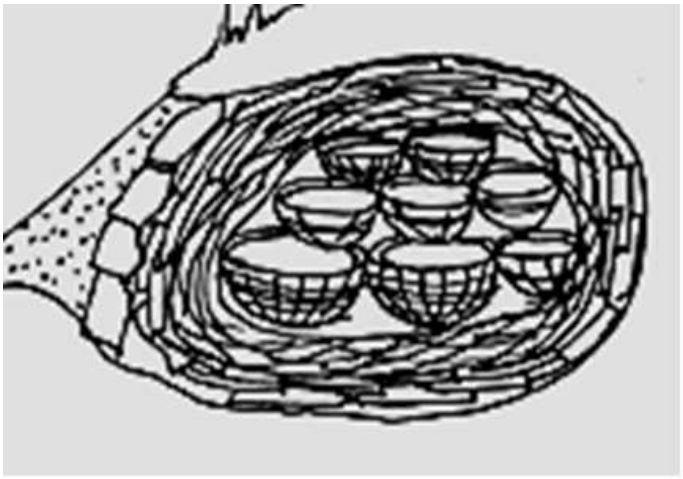
This scout pit has been constructed with the crawlway type of entrance at one end.



Buried Caches: Elevated food caches are designed to keep your food out of reach of hungry animals, but buried caches are used to hide and store food, equipment, supplies, fuel, or guns and ammo safely, until you need them. The simplest buried caches are just holes dug in the ground, lined with sticks and dry grass, filled and covered up. Ancient caches have been found which still contain dried grains, dried fruits and vegetables, and dried meat jerky. People have also cached water or oil in clay pots or glass jars, by filling the pits with soft sand, to avoid breakage.

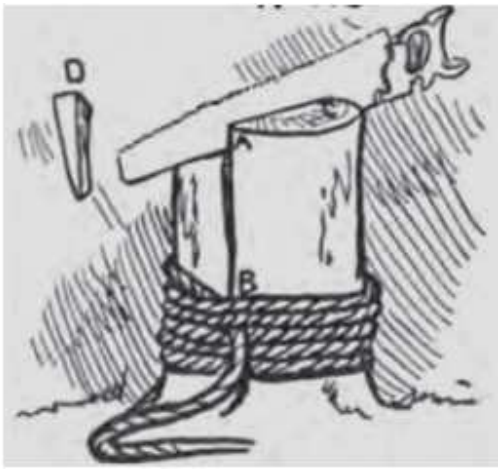


A slightly more sophisticated cache was made by burying a wooden barrel with a trap door, like a tiny root cellar.



Buried caches can also be made by digging horizontally into a hillside. You can still make primitive caches, but modern ones are made by burying supplies in sturdy plastic barrels, or various sizes of army surplus ammo cans.

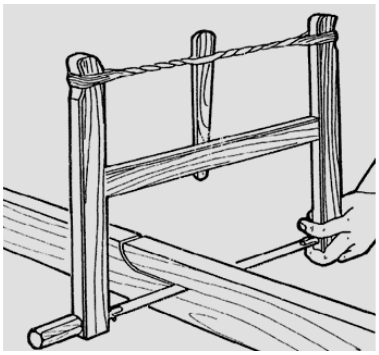
Cordage: Knowing how to make rope and cordage from locally available materials will come in handy at a survival cabin, because there are always many uses for cordage, such as tying lashings, or making nets.

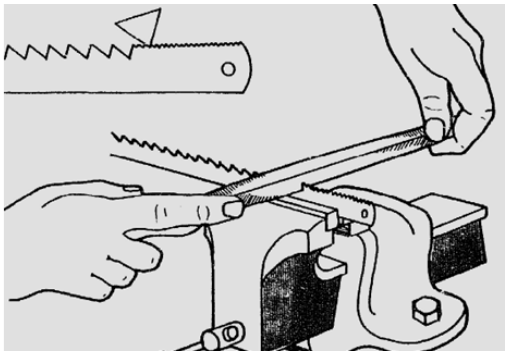


Tools and Techniques: You can make a lot of simple tools yourself, if you know how (such as wooden mallets). The more tools you know how to make, the better equipped you can become through your own efforts. The same thing applies to techniques, or skills. Knowing some clever techniques, such as how to make and use a stump vise, will make life at your survival cabin less frustrating. See my articles “101 Survival Skills”, and “Simple Improvised Tools”, for more details. I like to improvise, and learning how to make your own stuff is fun!

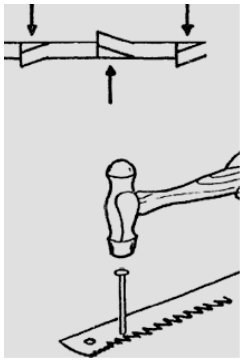
Adze: An adze is a simple tool that people seldom use any more, but they come in handy for many primitive wood-working tasks, such as making wooden bowls, log planters, log watering troughs, and dugout canoes.

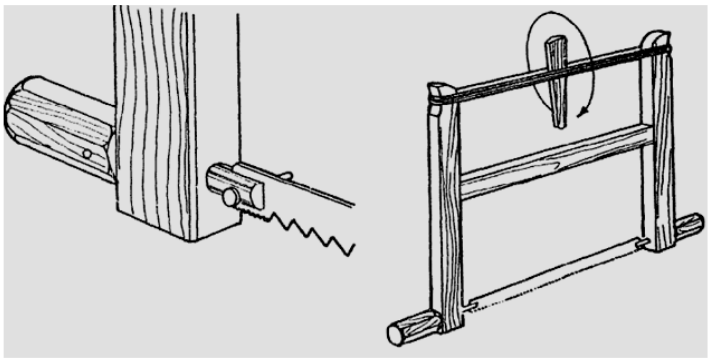
Saws: You can make an improvised bow saw from sticks or lumber, if you have a saw blade.



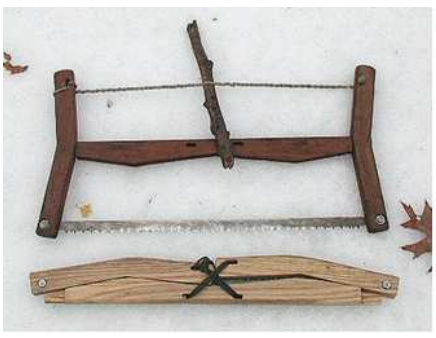


If you don't have a saw blade, you can make crude versions from any strips of steel that might be available. A triangular file can be used to shape teeth into the edge of soft steel, but hardened steels, such as steel straps found on large shipping boxes, should be softened first, by annealing (heat to red in a fire, then let cool slowly).



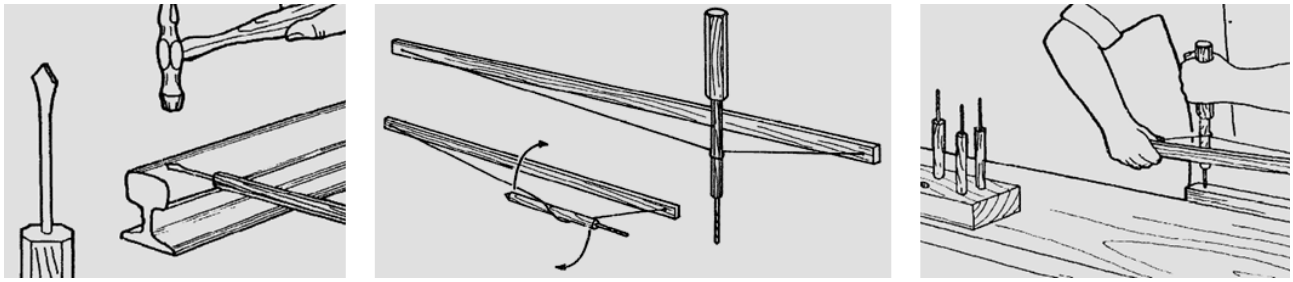


Improvised saw blades will not cut as well as store-bought versions, but they do work. For best results, use a small punch, or a nail, to set the saw teeth (bend them outwards slightly, alternating in opposite directions).



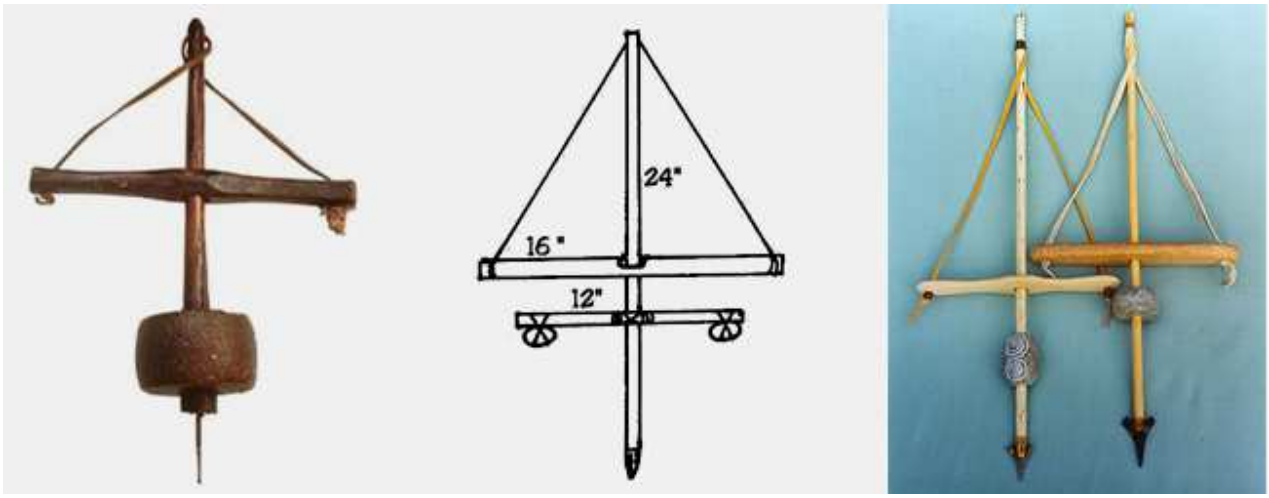
One way to keep a store-bought saw blade handy, is to make a belt from two layers of leather, with the blade hidden inside. Bow saw blades are flexible (this is why you must use cordage, to tension the saw framework).

Snow Saw: Useful for shaping snow blocks when building igloos, a functional snow saw can be made from wood.



Drill: You can make a small bow drill, made like a friction fire drill, using a sharpened nail as the drill bit. If you have several small drill bits (or different size nails), you can make an entire drill set the same way.

Parts of a Bow Drill: A bow drill consists of a spindle with drill bit, a bow with thong, and a pivot block.



Pump drill: A pump drill is similar to a bow drill, except the thong is tied to the spindle, and then to a crossbar. You wind the thong around the spindle (by turning the spindle by hand to ready it), then push down on the bar to make the drill spin. A flywheel weight keeps the spindle turning, and the thong rewinds itself for the next pump.

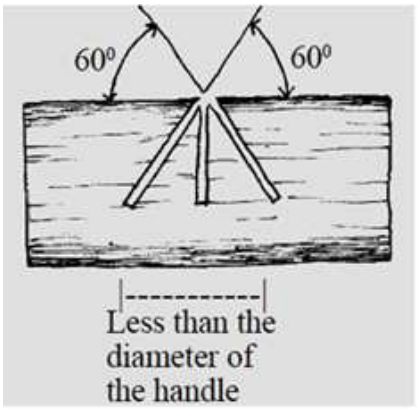
Augers: If you have an auger, or a whole set of them, you can add wooden handles to them, like Proenneke did.

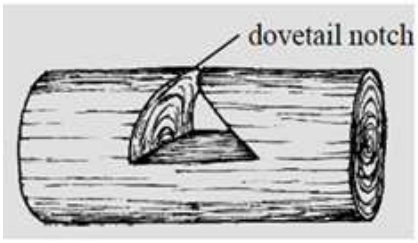
An old brace and bit set is faster to use than a wooden T-handle, but if you don’t have one, you can make them. The homemade braces on the right aren’t as sophisticated as the metal version on the left, but they do work ok.

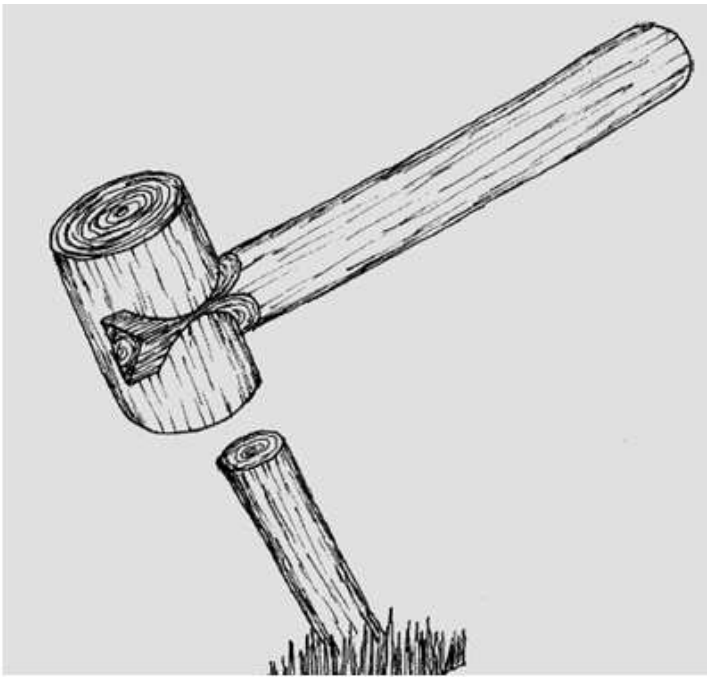
Blacksmithing Tools: To be as self-sufficient as possible, you can make your own nails, tools, and hardware items, using basic blacksmithing tools. The minimum set is an anvil, hammer, tongs, and a forge and bellows. You can make improvised versions of these items, see my article “Scrounging Metal and Survival Blacksmithing” for details. For fuel for the forge, if you don’t have access to coal, you can make your own homemade charcoal.

A blacksmithing setup at a survival cabin can be very small, like the example on the left (notice the pit forge), or you can construct an entire smithy, with a permanent stone forge, like the example on the right (although if you don’t have an anvil, you can substitute an engine block, etc.). The nice thing about blacksmithing skills is that you can use crude improvised tools to make better tools. All you need is a good supply of scrap metal, for materials.

Another good item to make is a simple grindstone, useful for shaping metal, and sharpening tools and weapons.

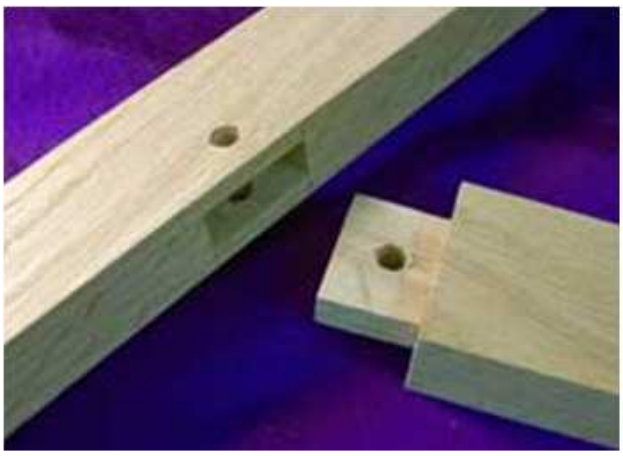






Dovetails: The dovetail notch is a handy technique for making wooden items, like this maul.

Check out this clever bench, which is made without any fasteners, only dovetail joints.



Another way to connect wooden pieces together is the pinned socket joint, as shown here.

One more useful tool to make, for use at your survival cabin, is the wooden shaving horse.

There are several ways to make a shaving horse, so choose the design that you like best.

The shaving horse is used to hold wooden pieces, while you shape them with a drawknife, or other tools.

More Stuff: Here are even more items to consider; some are useful, some are decorative, and some are both:

I like hurricane lamps, but if you don't have any, you can make improvised versions from available materials.

These simple oil lamps, made from stone or clay, can burn olive oil, nut oils, or rendered animal fats.

Shown here are pitch sticks (glue made from pitch and charcoal), and some improvised snow goggles.

Spoons, bowls, and many other cooking utensils can be carved from wood, and they work as well as metal ones.

If you need to grind seeds, nuts, or grains, make a primitive mortar and pestle, or a metate.

Improvised torches are easy to make, from rolled strips of dried tree barks (birch is good).

The Swedish torch is another useful bushcraft item you can make, good for outdoor lighting, and for cooking.

Any survival cabin setup could be improved with the addition of an improvised outdoor cooking station.

You can make your own wooden cooking skewers, all you need is some sticks, and a good bushcraft knife.

Cooking stakes, and cooking planks, are items that are easy to make and use, for survival cooking.

Food drying racks are a useful addition to any survival cabin setup.

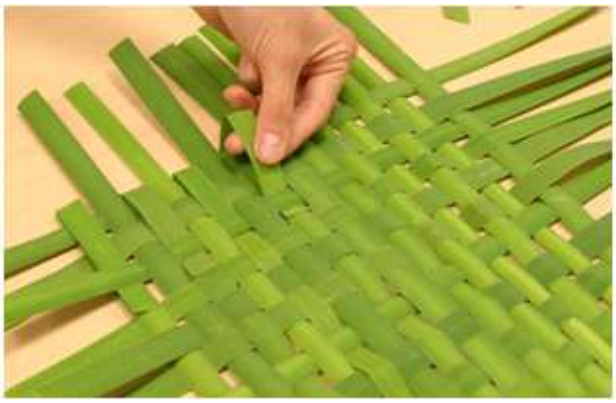
An improvised smoker can be as simple as a food drying rack that is covered by tarps, or animal hides.

Simple pole frameworks make for useful hide drying racks, and a hide on a rack makes a nice cabin decoration.

Basic bushcraft skills and pioneering skills, such as knowing how to lash sticks and poles together with cordage, allow you to create any number of useful items, from improvised camp gear, to things like animal feed troughs.

This is one way to make a sturdy stick gate, but the same design can be adapted for doors, shutters, or table tops.

A frame like this one can be used for bunk beds, or you can add more shelves and make a storage unit.



Cattail leaves, reeds, or twisted grasses can be woven into mats, and other survival gear.

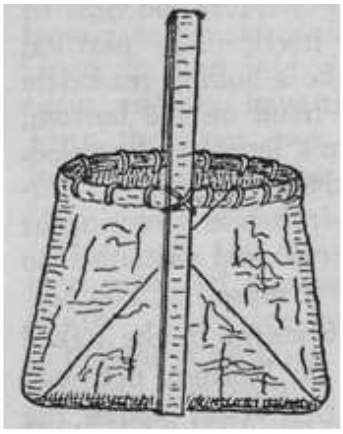
Various other types of plant materials can be tied or woven together, to make the same types of gear.

These cattail leaves make a superior, cushy mat, softer than most other wilderness materials.

The old-fashioned hand washboard still works to get clothes clean, and they also make good cabin decorations. If you don't have one, you can always make your own improvised version from wood, like many pioneers did.

Another useful item you can make from wood is the prospector's sluice box, nice to have when panning for gold.

Here is an improvised frame, for mirrors and pictures, and an end table and baskets, made from sticks.



Baskets made from flexible tree barks, such as birch, are a traditional wilderness container you can learn to make.

Here are some examples of bark baskets and containers.

I am fond of stick deer, and their larger cousin, log deer. They are decorative, and they also make good targets!

Improvised canteens, made from gourds, ostrich eggs, of sections of bamboo, make interesting cabin decorations.

I like to make primitive fishing hooks and nets, and they look good hanging on the cabin wall.

Harpoons can be made from modern or primitive materials, and make for an interesting display piece.

Here is one way to make primitive harpoon heads.

Primitive archery gear is another good choice, for cabin decorations that are also functional (Lets go hunting!)

There are many ways to make arrowheads, spear heads, and harpoon heads, and they make nice displays.

Crossbows are enjoyable to make, and to practice with. This miniature is suitable for indoor target practice.

Animal bones are another fun material to use, when making primitive tools and weapons.

If you learn how to knap flint, obsidian, or glass, you can make your own decorative stone knives.

One of my favorite cabin decorations is a rifle in a crate, and it is also quite useful (Die! Zombies Die!).

The only cabin decoration more enjoyable than a rifle in a crate, is a crate full of rifles (collect the whole set!)

If you want to make a more sophisticated display, you can turn your rifle crate into a coffee table, like this.

Don’t laugh, but there are even more things you could do at a survival cabin, if you wish. For instance, you could build a primitive fishing pier or boat dock, or make elevated towers or tree houses, for use as lookout positions or hunting stands, or you could construct animal traps and cages, for your small livestock. There are several types of improvised bridges you can make, that would make it easier to get across a stream, etc. So while you may never actually need to build a survival cabin, to help you live through a long-term disaster, you could always do these things just for the fun of it. But then again, hungry mutant cannibal alien zombies could very well be planning to launch an EMP attack at any moment, so you might want to keep your guard up, just in case!